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ABSTRACT

The purpose of a research study was to describe the relationship between parental unemployment and adolescent employment realities and plans. Data were obtained through a survey of 2,297 seniors from 32 public, 5 alternative, and 2 private high schools in the State of Washington. Incidence of adult unemployment was found to be related to the parent's occupational socioeconomic index (SEI). In addition, adolescents with an unemployed parent were less likely to be working at a part-time job and more likely to plan on working full-time after high school graduation. Among adolescents with unemployed parents, ethnic origin was associated with present unemployment but also with plans to be employed full-time after graduation. High-ability students were more likely than low-ability adolescents to plan on college despite unemployment of a parent. Gender did not produce significant results. (Three data tables are appended.) (Author/YLB)

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An initial description of the relationship between parental unemployment and adolescent employment

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Running Head: PARENTAL UNEMPLOYMENT

Abstract

Research into the influence of parental unemployment on adolescent work variables was investigated. Incidence of adult unemployment was found to be related to the parent's occupational SEI; in addition, adolescents with an unemployed parent were less likely to be working at a part-time job and more likely to plan on working full-time after high-school graduation. Among adolescents with unemployed parents, ethnic origin was associated with present unemployment but plans to be employed full time after graduation. High-ability students were more likely than low-ability adolescents to plan on college despite unemployment of a parent. Gender did not produce significant results.

An initial description of the relationship between parental unemployment and adolescent employment

In the literature on parental unemployment, most research has focused on the changes which develop in family relationships. This has meant investigations into increases in stress (Moen, 1983; Moen, Kain & Elder, 1982), coping strategies (Voydanoff, 1983), or the loss of authority of the traditional (i.e., male) breadwinner (Komarovsky, 1940). This prior research began with studies on families caught in the Great Depression and has continued to study families experiencing recessions in the 1970s and 1980s.

Increased interest has been expressed in the impact parental unemployment has on the family's financial well-being and the possible outcomes for adolescents. Not surprisingly, unemployment has a negative relationship to family income (Hill, 1983); this is true despite the perception that most unemployed persons receive unemployment insurance. In fact, approximately 50% of the families with an unemployed adult went without other sources of support, i.e., unemployment insurance, social security, or welfare (Moen, 1982; Moen, 1983). Thus, parental unemployment can mean hardship to the family and its adolescent members.

The family's economic health is singularly important for the adolescent. A clear and consistent connection has already been established between the family's socioeconomic status (SES) and its ability to purchase a status-enhancing college education for its offspring (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Marini & Greenberger, 1978). Unemployment of a parent, then, puts a family with

an adolescent at differential financial risk to experience economic deprivation (Moen, 1980a; Moen, 1980b) and minority or female-headed families at especial risk (Flaim, 1984; Rodgers, 1985); this reflects the inclination of the family to reduce its goals to more realistic levels (Moen, 1983). Therefore, money for discretionary activities is redirected toward essentials and the aspirations of acquiring college educations for family adolescents are reassessed (Moen, 1983).

During the Great Depression, the most frequent response of the family to the unemployment of its head was the entrance of the wife into the labor market. In 1974 this remains a common response as 36% of the families with unemployed heads had a wife working (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1975). However, in the 1980s, when two-paycheck families are more common than during the 1930s and two salaries necessary for purchasing such items as homes, this response to financial hardship is not an option (Moen, 1983); the wife already works, and, indeed, it may be the wife's unemployment that has caused the decline in family resources.

The second response to parental unemployment most frequently mentioned by Depression families was the entrance of an adolescent into the labor market. The family can be described as a system whereby a lack experienced through one member can be offset by the effort of another member. Much theory on family well-being has accepted this view that the adolescent finds a job and contributes to the family income (Moen, Kain & Elder, 1983). Elder's (1974) research confirmed that parental unemployment during the Depression increased the chance that boys and girls worked. However, Ellwood and Wise (1982) found that only 18% of the adolescents who worked in the 1970s contributed their earnings to the family; adolescent wages typically went to their own upkeep.

The problem with this seemingly simple and straightforward picture is the assumption that labor market conditions apply to adults but not to adolescents. In other words, the adult labor market differs from the adolescent labor market in ways such that adults who are unemployed can expect adolescents to become employed. This is the "countercyclical" argument (Jurman, 1981) for which documentation exists: as adult employment increases, adolescent employment possibilities worsen, and vice versa. Thus, adults and adolescents compete for the same employment—their labor is interchangeable—and the price of adult labor determines who presently occupies the job. This is an oversimplification of a complicated process; yet it does capture the premise of countercyclical employment in the labor market.

However, much evidence belies this picture. High adult unemployment can and does coexist with high adolescent unemployment (Cavan & Ranck, 1971; Freeman, 1982); Rees and Gray (1982) found parental unemployment to have little relationship to youth employment. Unemployment hits minority adults and adolescents hardest (Flaim, 1984; Freeman & Wise, 1982) and is most likely to strike low-SES occupations, precisely those occupations for which adolescents are most competitive (Ferman & Gardner, 1979; Moen, Kain & Elder, 1982; Super & Wright, 1941a). Thus, it is unrealistic to expect that adolescents can gain employment when adults fail to; the truth is that the adolescent labor market may be more similar to the adult market than previously thought. Adolescents may face the same "structural unemployment" (Anderson & Sawhill, 1978) as do adults and may be affected by employers' preference for certain types of labor irrespective of their age.

This can be confirmed by reviewing two bodies of research which tell us who among adolescents are working. Research into parental unemployment found that adolescents were likely to be unemployed themselves (Freeman, 1982); both parent and child were finding it difficult to get a job. Research into labor force participation found a curvilinear relationship between incidence of adolescent employment and family SES (Endriss & Froomkin, 1980; National Center for Education Statistics, 1981; Young, 1979); low-SES students were least likely, and middle-SES adolescents most likely, to be working. This means that irrespective of parental unemployment, youths from low-SES families work less (Ellwood & Wise, 1982) and do not make plans to attend college (see Schulenberg, Vondracek & Crouter, 1984, for review). Therefore, when low SES and unemployment occur in the same family, adolescents are doubly at risk. Consistent with the Life-Span Development Perspective (Elder, 1974; Elder & Rockwell, 1979), the family mediates difficulties encountered by the adolescent; however, when both low socioeconomic status and relative economic deprivation (as might be caused by parental unemployment) were present, the family's ability to lessen adolescent difficulties was noticeably curtailed. Adolescents living in low-SES families with an unemployed parent seem to suffer from a "double handicap."

These results question whether adolescents work to offset financial need caused by low-SES standing or parental unemployment. In Cavan and Ranck's (1971) study of Depression-era adolescents, 78.6% of the unemployed girls and 45.7% of the unemployed boys were from families on relief; only 21.4% of the employed girls and 20.4% of the employed boys were from families on relief. Clearly, even in the 1930s, family need, as indicated by receipt of relief, was not associated with adolescent employment, the opposite being true.

However, strong evidence has already been presented for a "triple handicap" experienced by students from low-SES families, with an unemployed parent, and a third factor, i.e., race. Minority adolescents have unemployment rates twice that of caucasians (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1982). Ability might also operate as a "triple handicap" variable; adolescents with low GPAs are less likely to be working or planning on college (Freeman & Wise, 1982). Another factor which may affect youngsters as a "triple handicap" is Gender; in past research, males were more likely than girls to work and plan on college (Super & Wright, 1941b; Moen, Kain & Elder, 1982). Thus, a female with an unemployed parent may face a triple disadvantage.

The present research will attempt to describe the relationship between parental unemployment and adolescent employment realities and plans. The hypotheses to be tested are:

Hypothesis 1: Parental unemployment will be related to socioeconomic status of the parent's occupation.

Hypothesis 2: Parental unemployment will be associated with whether the adolescent is a) presently employed or b) plans to attend college after high-school graduation.

Hypothesis 3: Among adolescents with an unemployed parent, ethnic origin, ability, and gender (i.e., the "triple handicaps") will be associated to whether the adolescent is a) presently employed or b) plans to attend college.

Methodology

The data for the present study resulted from administration of a survey instrument validated and replicated in the process of sampling 2,297 seniors from 32 public, five alternative, and two private high schools in the State of Washington. The schools were chosen based on a stratified sampling technique that ensured representation from all major communities and geographic regions in the state. Selection of schools into the sample was contingent upon receipt of the principal's permission to conduct the study; thus the process was not strictly random. Therefore, a comparison of pertinent data was made post facto to the Washington State High School and Beyond (National Center for Education Statistics, 1981) study, which revealed no systematic bias.

With the assistance of school principals, teachers were identified who taught courses required for high school graduation and in which enrollment was primarily seniors. Teachers administered the questionnaire to their classes one day mid-week during May 1983. The month of May in 1983 had the highest adult unemployment rate in Washington state and thus represents the lowest ebb of the recessionary period. The majority (60.1%) of seniors had part-time jobs and 27.2% of these seniors had an unemployed parent.

To test Hypothesis 1, a one-tail t-test was calculated to compare the occupational socioeconomic status of the unemployed parents with that of employed parents. Given the evidence on the greater incidence of unemployment among lower-status occupations, it is predicted that unemployed parents will have a lower mean SEI than employed ones. Separate tests were made for mothers and fathers; housewives were treated as missing data for this analysis.

Occupational socioeconomic status was operationalized by coding all parents' occupations with the 1970-Census-based Duncan Socioeconomic Index (SEI) of occupations (Powers, 1982).

For Hypothesis 2, chi-square tested for independence between Parental Employment (Yes or No) and both adolescent work variables: Adolescent Presently Employed (Yes or No) and Adolescent Post-Graduation Plans (Work or College). The subsample of interest for Hypothesis 3 was limited to those adolescents with at least one unemployed parent (N=571), and analyses for independence via Chi-square of the "triple handicap" variables (Ethnic Origin, Ability, and Gender) and the adolescent work variables were conducted. Ethnic Origin included Caucasians (79.4%) and collapsed Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans into one Minority category (20.6%). Ability was operationalized by reference to the adolescent's GPA and dichotomized into a Low, or below-2.5-GPA category (24.7%), and a High, or above-2.5-GPA category (75.3%). Gender was either Male (47.4%) or Female (52.6%).

Results

The results from the one-tail t-test for Hypothesis 1 reveals significant t-values for both mothers and fathers (see Table 1). Clearly, the likelihood of unemployment for an adult is related to his/her occupational socioeconomic status as captured by the Duncan SEI. Unemployed parents have, on the average, lower-SEI occupations than parents with steady employment.

Insert Table 1 about here

These results mean that adolescents with an unemployed parent are also more likely to be in a family with a lower socioeconomic position if, as is normally the case, the socioeconomic status of the parents' occupations determines the socioeconomic position of the family. All in all, adolescents in this sample may be living in a lower-socioeconomic family that is presently experiencing another more severe financial hardship due to unemployment of a parent. While not conclusive, this does provide some support for the "double handicap" hypothesis.

Insert Table 2 about here

In the test for independence between parental employment status and adolescent employment status, chi-square is significant. However, the meaning is not clear without inspecting individual cells (see Table 2). Adolescents with working parents are more likely to also be working themselves; those with an unemployed parent are less likely to have some part-time employment. This is clearly in contradiction to our expectations that an adolescent with a family breadwinner (be they male or female) out of work would find employment in order to contribute to the family's welfare. On the contrary, we find that adolescents with an unemployed parent are not more likely to be working. Thus, these adolescents mirror the unemployment of their parents.

Also in Table 2 are the results of the test for independence between parental employment status and the adolescent's post-graduation plans. The significant chi-square reveals that parental unemployment can and does affect the adolescent's plans for the future: the high-school senior with an unemployed parent was more likely to plan on working after high-school graduation than is

to be expected by chance. Unemployment of a parent clearly influences the senior's estimation of the resources available for college attendance.

Additional tests of independence were planned for Hypothesis 3; generally, the question is whether--for adolescents with an unemployed parent--such categorical variables as Ethnic Origin, Ability, and Gender were associated with adolescent work variables. The results, given in Table 3, are mixed. First, Ethnic Origin did produce a significant chi-square with Adolescent Presently Employed; being a minority seems to lower the adolescent's chances for employment. In this case, the "triple handicap" hypothesis can be tentatively supported: among adolescents already experiencing a lower family income due to parental unemployment, which occurs more frequently to lower-SES families, minority adolescents were also less likely to have a job to lessen the financial blow. However, Ethnic Origin did seem to be independent of the individual's assessment of future choices, as captured by the adolescent's plan to work or attend college. This finding is consistent with prior research which found caucasian adolescents to be quite optimistic of their future chances despite existence of parental unemployment or severe adult unemployment in the community (Meyer, 1984).

Insert Table 3 about here

For the Ability variable, these results were reversed. No significant differences between Low- and High-Ability students were evident in their labor force participation. However, Ability did have a significant relationship to the adolescent's future plans; not surprisingly, the more-able student was more

likely to plan on attending college and their less-able peer to plan on working full-time after high-school graduation. The High-Ability adolescent seems to plan on overcoming the disadvantages of reduced family resources caused by an unemployed parent or lower socioeconomic status while the Low-Ability student, saddled with less family resources and marginal attractiveness to college admissions personnel, plans on giving up college for the immediate future.

The results for the third "triple handicap" variable, Gender, were consistently non-significant. Females are no less likely to be working after school and are just as likely as males to plan on college. These findings show tentative support for inter-cohort differences between adolescents experiencing parental unemployment in the 1980s and those upon which many post-Depression studies were conducted. The many gender differences found by those earlier studies seem not to be confirmed in the experiences of this latter-day sample.

Discussion

The present results allow us to ask serious questions about what certain adolescents are experiencing when a parent becomes unemployed. We know that the unemployed parent will, on average, have a lower-SEI occupation; thus, the adolescent with an unemployed parent is also likely to be from a lower-SES family. This can operate as a "double handicap."

Adolescents with an unemployed parent are less likely to be working than their peers, yet they are more likely to plan on working full time after graduation. This seems contradictory. Though they must be employed upon graduation, their present unemployment is poor preparation for impressing future

employers and, indeed, research by Meyer and Wise (1982) found that those who worked during high school were more likely to have jobs after graduation. Lacking work experience, and needing a job, they may be embarking upon a life of structural unemployment.

Clearly, "triple handicaps" do not apply for all adolescents. Being a minority, however, clearly adds to the adolescent's problems: they are less likely to have a job and perhaps more likely to need one soon. On the other hand, low- and high-ability adolescents with unemployed parents are equally likely to be working; however, it is not surprising that higher ability allows the adolescent to overcome whatever financial difficulties parental unemployment may have caused and plan on attending college. Lastly, it is refreshing to note that opportunities for employment have equalized to some extent since the Depression for males and females; females were no less likely to work or plan on college than their brothers.

Conclusion

These results do not seem to support the "countercyclical" labor market whereby adolescents compete with adults for employment. Rather, it appears that adolescents are facing a labor market that affects their parents' lives in ways similar to their own.

This leads us to an appreciation of the macroeconomic forces which determine adolescent chances for employment. Freeman and Wise (1982) found that youth employment was "highly sensitive" to the health of the economy and the present research seems to confirm that the most important influence on adolescent

employment and future plans is the strength of the economy as a whole. The vicissitudes of tight labor markets clearly apply to adult and adolescent alike. This means that the probable outcome for the youth who finds employment difficult to secure as an adolescent is a lifetime of unemployment or of marginal employment. This concern alone should be sufficient to stir interest in policies to prevent the losing of whole lives to unemployment.

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Table 1

One-Tail T-test of Parental SEI and Parental Employment Status

	Mean SEI	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	t value	df	p
Mothers						
Unemployed	36.85	28.41	1.41	-5.11	656	<.0001
Employed	45.03	25.66	.76			
Fathers						
Unemployed	37.48	31.05	1.31	-6.01	959	<.0001
Employed	46.55	29.12	.75			

Table 2

Chi-Squares of Parental Employment Status and Adolescent Work Variables

	Chi-square	df	p
Presently Employed (Yes or No)	10.825	1	=.001
Post-Graduation Plans (Work or College)	8.916	1	<.01

Presently Employed	Unemployed Parent: Yes	Unemployed Parent: No
Yes	O=318	O=953
	E=352	E=920
No	O=263	O=567
	E=230	E=601

Table 3

Chi-Squares of Ethnic Origin/Ability/Gender and Adolescent Work Variables for Adolescents with an Unemployed Parent

	Chi-square	df	p
Ethnic Origin (Caucasian or Minority)			
Presently Employed (Yes or No)	5.52	1	<.02
Post-Graduation Plans (Work or College)	.39	1	n.s.
Ability (Low or High GPA)			
Presently Employed (Yes or No)	2.78	1	n.s.
Post-Graduation Plans (Work or College)	7.58	1	<.01
Gender (Male or Female)			
Presently Employed (Yes or No)	.51	1	n.s.
Post-Graduation Plans (Work or College)	.88	1	n.s.